Supreme Court, U. S.
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IN THE

Supreme Court of the United States

No. 75-54

..... Term, 197.....

LINDA ANN MOUNT and
JEROLD H. MOUNT, her husband,
Petitioner,

v.

HAROLD R. SUMNER.

PETITION FOR A WRIT OF CERTIORARI TO THE UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS FOR THE THIRD CIRCUIT

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PETITION FOR A WRIT OF CERTIORARI TO THE UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS FOR THE THIRD CIRCUIT

Your Petitioner prays that your Honorable Court issue a Writ of Certiorari to review the judgment of the United States Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit entered in the above entitled civil action April 15, 1975.

Reference to Reports of Opinions Delivered in the Courts Below

No opinion was delivered by the Court when it entered judgment by Judgment Order of the United States Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit, dated April 15, 1975.. The Order is reprinted in the Appendix hereto, page A-1, *infra*.

Memorandum and Order of the United States District Court for Western District of Pennsylvania dismissing plaintiffs' motion for new trial is reprinted in the Appendix at pages A2-A6, *infra*.

Jurisdiction

Linda Mount and Jerry Mount instituted this action in the United States District Court for the Western District of Pennsylvania. Jurisdiction was based upon 28 U.S.C. Section 1332—Diversity of Citizenship and Jurisdictional Amount. After jury verdict for the defendant, an appeal was taken to the United States Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit which entered a judgment order affirming the judgment of the District Court.

Questions Presented

1. Does the Supreme Court of the United States take into realistic account the potential for domination of jury deliberation function by the trial judge in a six man jury as opposed to a twelve man jury?

2. Is the Supreme Court of the United States mistaken in permitting a six man jury trial in Civil Trials?

3. After a review of the petitioners' asserted grievances: special verdict questions; a six man jury; no reasoned written opinion from appeals court; a refusal to recognize the claim that the defendant doctor committed malpractice when he did not possess the requisite knowledge of a specialist in obstetrics; does justice require a new trial, a new trial with a twelve man jury, or remanding the case to the United States Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit for a reasoned written opinion?

4. Is it injustice for the United States Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit not to render a reasoned written opinion where the discipline of writing an opinion will cause a contrary result?

5. Has the District Court and the United States Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit done violence to the law of medical malpractice in Pennsylvania by ignoring the law requiring a medical doctor to possess the required knowledge to practice his profession?

Statutory Provision Involved

Section 1332. Diversity of Citizenship; Amount in Controversy: Costs

(a) The district courts shall have original jurisdiction of all civil actions where the matter in controversy exceeds the sum or value of $10,000.00, exclusive of interest and costs, and is between—

(1) citizens of different States;

(2) citizens of a State, and foreign states or citizens or subjects thereof; and

(3) citizens of different States and in which foreign states or citizens or subjects thereof are additional parties.

Statement of the Case

Linda Mount and Jerold Mount, husband and wife, and citizens of the State of Ohio, brought this suit against Harold Sumner, a citizen of the State of Pennsylvania, for damages sustained when the defendant committed medical malpractice by reason of his neither having the requisite skill and knowledge of a medical doctor specializing in obstetrical medicine nor exercising such requisite skill and knowledge.

The defendant injured the anal sphincter muscle of wife-plaintiff while delivering her children. The defendant was negligent in that he was unaware that injury to the anal sphincter muscle could occur as a result of this technique of child birth delivery. Further, defendant did not know to look for and repair said injury to the anal sphincter muscle. As a result of non-repairing the injury to the anal sphincter muscle, the muscle eventually completely separated and wife-plaintiff had to undergo corrective surgery. The corrective operation was unable to completely restore the function of her anal sphincter muscle. She is permanently injured and permanently suffers from impairment of the control of her bowel excretion. The physical injury caused by defendant, that is the non-repair of the injured anal sphincter muscle was more than two years before suit was filed, a time in excess of the apparent statute of limitations. The time in which wife-plaintiff learned of defendant's lack of requisite knowledge and skill was within two years of filing suit. Defendant's lack of knowledge could not have been known until defendant admitted his lack of requisite knowledge on giving his deposition and at trial. The plaintiffs did not discover the injury which was the cause of wife-plaintiff's symptoms until after two years. For the sake of emphasis and clarity permit us to state that the injury causing wife-plaintiff's symptoms was the failure to recognize and repair wife-plaintiff's lacerated sphincter muscle.

At the trial of the claim against defendant, plaintiffs assert the Trial Judge submitted fallacious and jury-dominating written interrogatories to the jury. Appeal was timely taken. The Third Circuit Court of Appeals sustained the Trial Judge without written opinion. The case was tried in front of a jury consisting only of six jurors.

Petitioners' Argument for Allowance of the Writ

At trial the Court submitted written special verdict questions to the Jury; they are:

1. Did plaintiffs know or should they have known on or before September 27, 1970, the physical condition of Linda Ann Mount for which they now claim damages existed?

ANSWER "YES" or "No" .....

2. Did plaintiffs know or should they have known on or before September 27, 1970, the alleged cause of the injuries to Linda Ann Mount for which they now claim damages?

ANSWER "YES" or "No" .....

3. Was there any negligence on the part of Dr. Harold R. Sumner which was the proximate cause of the injuries to Linda Ann Mount?

ANSWER "YES" or "No" .....

4. What is the amount of damages sustained by Linda Ann Mount as a result of the defendant's negligence?

$.....

5. What is the amount of damages sustained by Jerold H. Mount as a result of the injuries to his wife, Linda Ann Mount?

$.....

The Jury deliberated and came back to the court and asked for help with the special verdict questions. The Jury deliberated again and asked the Court for help with the special verdict questions. After the second inquiry the Jury deliberated further and entered an award for the defendant by answering the first two questions in the

affirmative. It is suggested that the Jury in its deliberation and in its two requests for help was trying to overcome the distortion that the special verdict questions did to the facts and the pertinent law.

The plaintiffs assert that the special verdict questions are fallacious. First, they are fallacious because of omission. They omit plaintiffs' theory that the defendant was negligent because he did not have the requisite knowledge of a medical doctor specializing in obstetrics. The plaintiff offered testimony that the defendant lacked knowledge that an anal sphincter muscle could be severed by the techniques of delivery of birth he employed. This lack of knowledge was the cause of his not looking for a severed anal sphincter muscle and of course, not repairing it. Plaintiffs' cause of action based on defendant's lack of knowledge can only date from the time the lack of knowledge was admitted by the defendant. Such lack of knowledge was not admitted until depositions were taken during discovery on January 3, 1973. The lack of requisite knowledge was affirmed during trial by defendant on cross-examination.

Second, the special verdict questions are fallacious because they contained latent ambiguities. The injury of which the plaintiffs complain is the non-repair of wife-plaintiff's lacerated anal sphincter muscle. The symptoms that exhibited themselves were incontinence and lack of control of flatulance. In question number one (1) the Court lumped the non-repair of the lacerated anal sphincter muscle, the incontinence, and the lack of control of the flatulance under the term "physical condition." The Court in question number two (2) tells the jury the plaintiffs only have one cause of action when under the evidence they had two causes. One is based on the non-repair of the

lacerated anal sphincter muscle. The other cause is based on the lack of professional knowledge possessed by defendant—defendant's lack of understanding that he should look for a lacerated anal sphincter muscle as a possible fault of the technique of delivery of birth he employed.

Third, the special verdict questions are fallacious because they express a misstatement of the law of Pennsylvania. The law of Pennsylvania is that the Statute of Limitations begins to run only upon the discovery of the agency of injuries. Ayers v. Morgan, 397 Pa. 282, 154 A 2d 788 (1959). That it was held that:

> The Pennsylvania Statute of Limitations providing that every suit brought to recover damages for injury wrongfully done to the person, in *case* where injury does not result in death, must be brought within two years from time *when* injury was done and not afterwards, began to run against patient's action against surgeon for alleged malpractice, not when surgeon allegedly left sponge in patient's abdomen during operation, but when patient almost nine years later discovered alleged presence of sponge in his abdomen.

The six member jury which plaintiffs had to submit to does not have the internal strength and dynamics to overcome the directions of a trial judge even when they are mistaken. This is especially true when the direction is in writing, expressed in excellent grammar and phrased with masterful rhetoric. Despite the evidence, the law and the argument of counsel, it was too much for the jury to overcome the dominating effect of the court. A group larger than six people is needed to be strong enough to overcome the force and direction of the trial court. A twelve man jury is needed to give the necessary strength.

On appeal the trial court was sustained by the Circuit Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit. The plaintiffs asked the Third Circuit to aid the plaintiffs and submitted a written argument and brief demonstrating where the trial court violated the law of Pennsylvania in regard to the Statute of Limitations.

The Third Circuit Court of Appeals sustained the trial judge by entering an order as follows:

JUDGMENT ORDER

After consideration of all contentions raised by appellants, it is

ADJUDGED AND ORDERED that the judgment of the district court be and is hereby affirmed.

Costs taxed against appellants.

No written opinion accompanied the order. It is suggested that if the Third Circuit Court of Appeals had reviewed the plaintiffs' contention under the discipline of a written opinion, a new trial would have been ordered. Instead, the plaintiffs received what amounts to a post card opinion.

The stature of the trial judge, the reputation of defense counsel, the possible belief that the Statute of Limitations should be applied in a way other than the Pennsylvania State Court applies it are factors that can effect and most naturally could effect the resultant judgment. Plaintiffs assert that the requirement of writing a well reasoned opinion is the only real protection they have to keep harmful irrelevancies from influencing a case.

While it is understandable that the appellate court wishes to avoid inexcusable delays and it is understandable that

some things may not be convenient or agreeable, it appears to the plaintiffs to be intolerable that expediency takes away the one thing that the plaintiffs believe will give them justice on appeal; namely, a written opinion.

We may speculate endlessly how the Circuit Court of Appeals arrived at its decision. This is a harmful thing. The plaintiffs are only two of the citizens of the United States. They wonder whether their problem, as big as it is to them, will be treated with the same regard they were taught that even little problems are cared for. It appears to them that their problem is not worth more than a post card comment. Hopefully, what we describe is something less than the Due Process due to the citizens of the United States.

Respectfully submitted,

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APPENDIX

Judgment Order

UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS
FOR THE THIRD CIRCUIT

No. 74-2035

LINDA ANN MOUNT and JEROLD H. MOUNT,
Appellants,

v.

HAROLD R. SUMNER.

W.D. Pennsylvania—Civil Action No. 72-802.

Submitted Under Third Circuit Rule 12(6)
April 14, 1975.

Before SEITZ, *Chief Judge*, ROSENN and WEIS, *Circuit Judges.*

After consideration of all contentions raised by appellants, it is

ADJUDGED AND ORDERED that the judgment of the district court be and is hereby affirmed.

Costs taxed against appellants.

By the Court,

SEITZ,
Chief Judge.

Attest:

THOMAS F. QUINN,
Clerk.

Dated: Apr. 15, 1975.

Memorandum

IN THE

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT

FOR THE WESTERN DISTRICT OF PENNSYLVANIA

LINDA ANN MOUNT and
JEROLD H. MOUNT, her husband.

Plaintiffs,

vs.

HAROLD R. SUMNER,

Defendant.

Civil Action No. 72-802

The above captioned medical malpractice suit was filed on September 27, 1972, alleging negligent child-birth treatment of the wife-plaintiff during a period which ended on November 10, 1966, the last day she was seen by the defendant-obstetrician. On that date, approximately six weeks after the birth of the wife-plaintiff's third child, she was examined by the defendant and advised by him that her condition was satisfactory. At the time of this examination she made no complaint. On December 25, 1966, six weeks later, however, she suddenly experienced a total loss of anal continency, which, together with other symptoms, plaintiffs now attribute to the defendant's failure to properly repair certain lacerations sustained by her in the course of several child-births at which defendant was her treating physician, including that of September 30,

1966, stated above. The wife-plaintiff consulted other physicians thereafter, but asserts that she was not informed of the cause of her condition until August, 1971. The defendant, of course, pleaded the Pennsylvania two-year Statute of Limitations applicable to personal injury actions.

A jury trial resulted in the following answers of the jury to special interrogatories:

> Did plaintiffs know or should they have known on or before September 27, 1970, the physical condition of Linda Ann Mount for which they now claim damages existed?
> Answer Yes.
>
> Did plaintiffs know or should they have known on or before September 27, 1970, the alleged cause of the injuries to Linda Ann Mount for which they now claim damages?
> Answer Yes.

Accordingly, judgment was entered for the defendant.

Plaintiffs move for a new trial, asserting precedural and substantive error in the submission and content of the special interrogatories to the jury. The Statute of Limitations issue was clearly a jury question, and this Court perceives no practical alternative to the procedure employed in submitting the same, nor is one suggested by plaintiffs. With respect to substance, the interrogatories were carefully framed to elicit the existence *vel non* of the requisites for application of the statute as enunciated in the controlling Pennsylvania Court decisions. *Schaffer v. Larzelere*, 410 Pa. 402 (1963) teaches:

> ". . . it is the duty of one asserting a cause of action against another to use all reasonable diligence

to properly inform himself of the facts and circumstances upon which the right of recovery is based and to institute the suit within the prescribed statutory period: *Patton v. Commonwealth Trust Co.*, 276 Pa. 95, 119 A. 834 (1923); *Turtzo v. Boyer*, 370 Pa. 526, 88 A. 2d 884 (1952)." Mere mistake, misunderstanding or lack of knowledge is not sufficient to toll the running of the statute: *Ridgway's Account*, 206 Pa. 587, 56 A. 25 (1903); *McEnery v. Metropolitan Life Ins. Co.*, 50 Pa. D & C 395 (1944). If, however, through fraud or concealment, the defendant causes the plaintiff to relax his vigilance or deviate from his right of inquiry, the defendant is estopped from invoking the bar of the limitation of the action: *Plazak v. Allegheny Steel Company*, 324 Pa. 422, 188 A. 130 (1936) and *Deemer v. Weaver*, 324 Pa. 85, 187 A. 215 (1936). Likewise, if the existence of the injury is not known to the complaining party and such knowledge cannot reasonably be ascertained within the prescribed statutory period, the limitation does not begin to run until discovery of the injury is reasonably possible. See, *Gotshall v. Langdon & Co.*, 16 Pa. Superior Ct. 158 (1901); *Lewey v. Fricke Coke Co.*, 166 Pa. 536, 31 A. 261 (1895); *Ayers v. Morgan*, 397 Pa. 282, 154 A. 2d 788 (1959); *Smith v. Bell Telephone Co. of Pa.*, 397 Pa. 134, 153 A. 2d 477 (1959).

It is the gist of plaintiff's attack that the interrogatories indicated a misinterpretation of the Pennsylvania limitation. They assert that the two-year period did not begin to run until the plaintiffs acquired knowledge of defendant's "culpability". It is this Court's opinion, however, that the defense is, *a fortiori*, available to one who may be without fault, and a plaintiff's knowledge of the "alleged cause of the condition for which damages are claimed", without respect to a defendant's culpability, is the proper test.

The instructions which accompanied the interrogatories were designed and did fully amplify the import of the questions, including the possible effects of fraud or concealment on the part if the defendant, and the jury's answers compelled application of the Statute.

All other trial errors asserted by the plaintiffs in support of their motion have been carefully considered and found to be without merit.

An appropriate order will be entered.

HERBERT P. SORG, *D. J.*

Dated: July 29, 1974.

Order

IN THE

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT

FOR THE WESTERN DISTRICT OF PENNSYLVANIA

LINDA ANN MOUNT and
JEROLD H. MOUNT, her husband,

Plaintiffs,

vs.

HAROLD R. SUMNER,

Defendant.

Civil Action No. 72-802

AND NOW, this 29th day of July, 1974.

IT IS ORDERED that the Plaintiffs' Motion for New Trial be and same is hereby denied.

HERBERT P. SORG, *D. J.*

cc Kenneth W. Behrend, Esq.,
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